**Material Contingency and the Principle of Sufficient Reason**

In a previous paper, I presented an account of material possibility, and claimed that it was foundational for all other forms of possibility. This analysis contrasts formal impossibility, i.e. inconceivability without contradiction in the conception, with actuality. Inspired by Kant’s Beweisgrund, this account proposes to revive and update an essentially Aristotelian account of possibility in which possibility is parasitic on actuality. While my purpose in that previous paper was to relate the notion of material possibility to other notions of possibility of interest to philosophers, in this paper I will to discuss the related notion of material contingency. In a subsequent paper, I hope to discuss material necessity.

**Material Contingency: A Preliminary Analysis** An entity is materially contingent if it is capable of existing, occurring, or obtaining at some time and capable of not existing (etc.) at other times in some possible world. For the most part, materially contingent beings will, in fact, exist at some times and not others, which times may vary from possible world to possible world. However, it is at least logically possible that some being might exist at all times in some possible world and yet still be materially contingent. Imagine, for example, a possible world in which the physical universe exists for a relatively short duration, so that there is a single star that comes into existence at the first moment of the universe and never burns out before that universe as a whole ceases to exist. Such a star would have existed at each moment of (physical) time in that universe, yet is still materially contingent. As such, we need to distinguish a number of aspects of material contingency. First, there is the material contingency we have just been discussing, which is associated with coming-to-be and passing away, or *existence change*, in those entities that last only for a discrete, finite amount of time in some world W. Second, there is the material contingency residing in the fact that the very existence of that thing, even if actual, need never have obtained at all. Thirdly and most fundamentally, there is the material contingency that resides in the dependence of that thing on conditions external to itself that, having been realized or actualized prior to its existence, it in no way constitutes. Since the latter is the most important, we shall be with it and use it to explicate the other two aspects of material contingency that rely on it.

Let us note, in the first place, that actual existence at T and possible non-existence at T are not mutually exclusive states. Something can exist at T yet be such that its non-existence at T is nevertheless really possible. In that case, possible non-existence will be understood to be *potential* non-existence, a second potency that merely awaits an appropriate stimulus, catalyst, or cause in order to be actualized as a fact about the world. Although the potentiality for non-existence is a potentiality for change, it is so merely as the privation or cessation of existence of something previously existent. Thus, while attributable to a thing it is not a positive attribute inhering in a subject precisely because the subject has ceased to exist at that time that this attribution becomes true. Even so, this does not prevent its being objectively true, as a matter of fact, that the thing in question has ceased to exist. This can occur in a number of ways. Cessation of existence is sometimes the consequence of some immanent process takings place in an existing thing, such as evanescence, i.e. “fading away,” as colors that bleach out of cloth, or through wearing out and resolution into parts, as when a house decays and falls into ruin. In other cases, an efficient cause may destroy a thing, as when the waves erode a rock, or an avalanche destroys a ski resort. Equally important and common, however, is the realization of the potentiality for non-existence and subsequent non-existence of a thing through privation – the removal of one or another of the necessary conditions for the continued existence of that thing. It is this latter sort of case that is of most interest to us here.

Observation, both casual and scientific, reveals to us that the continued existence of the things that belong to the natural world depends of conditions external to themselves. Living organisms, for example, need oxygen, food, water, a relatively restricted range of temperature, gravity, ambient radiation and so on, if they are to continue to live. Further, observation and experiment establish that these conditions are regular, predictable, and grounded in the natures of those things. Complex explanations can be given for why each of the foregoing (and many others besides) is absolutely necessary for a living organism like a human being to live and function. Indeed, it is precisely in terms of the natures that things possess that they possess their dispositional properties and the potencies (capacities and powers) grounded in those properties. Indeed, if this were not the case, natural science itself would not be possible. Although we can always be surprised to discover new ways in which existing things are liable to existence-change, there is too much empirical evidence for the foregoing claims for this general claim to be a matter of serious doubt.

This seemingly banal claim, however, has a couple of important metaphysical implications. The first is that materially contingent beings are such that their natures are *indifferent to existence*, as this is traditionally phrased. To say this is to say that, where materially contingent beings are concerned, the fact of their existence as opposed to their non-existence cannot be accounted for by reference to their natures. It is for this reason, as Kant notes, that there is no conceptual difference between an existent hundred thalers and one that is non-existent, and why it can be an open question whether, e.g., Bigfoot, the Loch Ness Monster, or Martians exist. While materially contingent things cannot be conceived of except as materially possible, hence as existentially possible as well, and hence as though they actually existed, it does not follow from this (as Hume and Kant seem to believe) that we must always conceive of them as actually existent. If that were the case, then we would not be able to conceive of an *imaginary* hundred thalers at all. In certain cases, we conclude that despite the fact that Martians, the Loch Ness monster, and Bigfoot are materially possible beings, they are non-actual. Given that prior to that judgment the existence of things is an open question awaiting adequate investigation, we can conceive of them as really possible without being committed to their actuality.

The second, closely related claim gives us a way of explicating a traditional distinction, namely, that in the case of materially contingent being, there is a real distinction between essence and existence. Materially contingent things are both actually existent and potentially non-existent at the same time, thus capable of non-existence at every moment that they actually exist. Because of this, as Farrer puts it, essence and existence are found in such beings “without proper unity.”[[1]](#footnote-1) Because they are separable and mutually indifferent principles in materially contingent beings, existence is not a property of anything, but neither is it merely a matter of being posited by a knowing subject. In order to account for existence as an objective fact about the world, we have to conceive of it as a separate principle of activity added to essence in order to instantiate, actualize, and realize that essence as nature and the thing that exemplifies that essence as a being. In this sense, Kant is correct that existence is not a predicate insofar as a predicate is taken to be the name of a property.

At the same time, essence should not be imagined to be somehow pre-existent on its own, a kind of second potency awaiting its full, concrete realization through having existence added to it. Essence without existence is merely materially possible as an object of thought. In the same way, we can think of essence as a limiting principle of the act of existence in materially contingent things that constitute each such thing as limited in the expression of that act to certain outcomes and not others. This is because essence (as nature) is principle of potentiality. Materially contingent beings are thus *finite* beings, in the traditional sense in which this means limited with respect to their potency, not simply be accident but by nature. Thus, a rose has to power by nature to grow, but not to uproot itself and move to a more favorable location. A human being by nature possesses the power to do calculus but not to regenerate a severed limb or fly through the air. For its part, a bat possesses, by nature, the power of flight, and a lizard the power to regenerate a lost appendage, but neither possesses the power to do calculus.

Existence, in turn, is intrinsically unlimited considered in itself, capable of being added to any essence to instantiate it as nature and by so doing constituting (with essence) a being, an actually existing thing instantiating and exemplifying a particular nature. However, just as we cannot hypostatize the essence of a materially contingent being as somehow pre-existent, neither should we conceive of existence as activity as a kind of unruly, formless stuff (like Aristotelian prime matter, Schopenhauerian Will or Bergsonian *élan vital*) upon which essence is somehow imposed, like a cookie-cutter on a mass of dough. Where materially contingent beings are concerned, existence without essence is not. While the separability of existence from essence marks such beings as composite beings, they are not (in this sense) composites of separately constituted elements, like bricks or grains of sand. Instead, essence and existence are, as it were, logically independent, mutually independent *aspects* of a single thing or being, which must be posited together without priority being assigned to either. For this reason, in things considered outside of their causes, existence and essence can be said to be identical insofar as they constitute a single being just as such. For this reason, the separation of existence from essence (as nature) in an existing thing does not result in the resolution of that being into two independently constituted parts (existence and essence as such) but instead the annihilation of the thing along with its individual act of existence and its particular instantiation of that essence. Neither that thing’s act of existence nor its particular instantiation of that essence (as nature) can survive existence-change.

The notion that materially contingent being is composite without being composed of independently constituted parts seems paradoxical, despite being undeniable. The paradoxical character of this account can be mitigated by reference to the Aristotelian distinction between form and matter.[[2]](#footnote-2) Despite this, however, an ineliminable element of paradox remains where the notion of existence is concerned and this is to be expected. For the analysis presented thus far strongly suggests that materially contingent beings are not fully intelligible in themselves and can only be understood when fitted into a more comprehensive metaphysical picture, if at all. Further, we inchoately recognize this fact inasmuch as we seek the complete explanation for the existence, as opposed to the non-existence, of materially contingent beings, in the prior existence of other things that bring it into being and in occurrent, standing conditions that sustain its existence. We quite naturally, and correctly, suppose that materially contingent things exist because the necessary and sufficient conditions for their existence have brought them into existence, and continue to exist because the external conditions necessary to prevent the realization of their potency for non-existence that they continue to possess at every moment that they actually exist. Full consideration of this point, as the reader has already suspected, will carry us beyond the realm of materially contingent being. For now, however, let us continue to restrict ourselves to this realm and continue to analyze this notion.

**Material Possibility and the Three Laws of Thought** To judge by appearances, some materially possible things are materially contingent: they actually exist but need not have existed. Further, among those things that are actually non-existent, there are some that might have or could have existed in the actual world; their non-existence is thus materially contingent. For this reason, any being whose existence/non-existence is materially contingent is an existentially contingent being. As such, every metaphysically contingent being will also be existentially contingent, i.e. it will be subject to existence-change, i.e. coming-to-be and passing-away. This provides us with the basis for an interpretation of the traditional three laws of thought as principles of material as opposed to formal logic and this will serve as a preliminary to the analysis of the traditional Principle of Sufficient Reason.

In the seventeenth century, it was common to treat the Laws of Thought as self-evident principles of reason, as they appear to be when interpreted *de dicto*. Thus, the principle of identity (“A is A”) was interpreted as the apparent tautology “If P is true, then it is true.” The Law of Non-Contradiction (“A is not non-A”) was interpreted as the claim that “P is not both true and false.” The Law of the Excluded Middle (“A is either A or non-A”) was interpreted as the claim that “Either P is true or P is false.” Nevertheless, these principles were often applied *de re* without any recognition that there was anything problematic about this. They were thus treated as substantive metaphysical principles that applied directly to things, their properties, and in particular to their existence. Thus, these principles were regarded as self-evident, *a priori* principles grasped by pure reason yet nevertheless applicable to real things. And so they are. Even so, when understood this way they are not merely principles of formal logic, but rather of material logic embedded in and justified by the analysis I have presented here and in the previous paper in this series.

The account of the three traditional laws of thought I shall give here is based on the Leibnizian principle to be actual means to be fully determinate, so that there is a uniquely correct answer to any question that may be raised about any thing posited as real or actual in a particular possible world. With regard to the existence of materially contingent being, we may characterize these principles as follows:

No materially possible being is both existent and non-existent at T in W. (Contradiction)

No materially possible being is neither existent nor non-existent at T in W. (Bivalence)

Every materially possible being is either existent or non-existent at T in W. (Excluded Middle)

As such, there is always a fact of the matter regarding the existence or non-existence of any existentially contingent being, which is to say, there is a fact about the world regarding the existence or non-existence of that being at any particular time. This means that there is a definite answer to the question whether that thing exists or fails to exist at T, for every materially possible being at every T. We can summarize this as a generalized version of the Principle of Identity:

Whatever is, is and whatever is not, is not.

Despite its propositional form, this is *not* a tautology. Instead, it asserts that whatever is actual at T in W exists at T in W, and whatever is non-actual at T in W fails to exist at T in W. There is more to being real or actual at T than simply existing at T. If something is actual at T, then there will be some determinate set of predicates that apply to it at T, such that for any possible predicate F there is a determinate fact of the matter whether that thing has or lacks F. Existence, though determinate as a matter of fact in relation to that thing, is neither a predicate of that thing nor something deducible from the nature of a materially contingent thing, but rather a precondition for its being actual in that further sense that involves its determinate being in relation to all possible predicates. The terms, then, are not semantically equivalent, and while actuality in the sense of being determinate in regard to every predicate presupposes existence as its necessary condition, the notion of existence is not contained in that of actuality, any more than the notion “having three sides” is contained in that of “triangle,” the formal definition of which makes no reference to the number of sides that figure possesses. Thus, even if we classify the claim that “Whatever is actual exists” as a conceptual truth, it is not so simply through the meaning of the terms that compose it, but instead a metaphysical fact about every thing that we “posit” as “real outside of its causes.” Let us now consider the upshot of these considerations for materially contingent beings.

**PSR as a Principle of Material Logic** Beginning in the seventeenth century, philosophers appealed to the PSR – Principle of Sufficient Reason – to justify claims about the nature of things on the basis of pure reason. While all proponents of the PSR maintained that the principle was both self-evident and known *a priori* through rational intuition, they also regarded it as a substantive principle applicable to reality. Hume and Kant rejected the notion of a priori substantive principles, insisting that all substantive claims were either contingent or restricted to the realm of appearances. Invariably, Hume and Kant both treat the PSR as a formal principle, known to be true on analytic or conceptual grounds. For Hume, every such principle has to be such that its denial is formally self-contradictory, the test for which is whether or not its denial is coherently conceivable. He thus proposes that, in fact, he can imagine something existing without a sufficient reason, and thus that there is any contradiction in denying the PSR. In that case, it is not necessarily true after all.[[3]](#footnote-3) For Kant, the PSR takes the form of the causal principle “Every event has a cause.” This, claims Kant, is a synthetic *a priori* truth; however, it is so, as the argument of the *Third Analogy* explicitly tries to show, only as a condition of the unity of experience on the side of object, and thus only in relation to the phenomenal rather than the noumenal world. I have given my response to Hume and see no reason to discuss the views of Kant, given the obscurity and doubtful value of his arguments on this score. Here I propose to consider the PSR as a principle of material, rather than formal, logic.

We can image almost anything we like, and many of these we can even imagine. It does not follow, however, that everything of this sort is materially possible. In particular, materially contingent beings can be conceived of as materially possible only in relation to a set of conditions necessary and sufficient for their existence at some particular time; this is to envisage what would be the case if that thing actually existed at that time, or to conceive of it as if it existed at T, or as *actually existent at T*. Further, since such a thing can exist under some conditions and not others without any change or alteration in either its nature or its associated concept, its nature is therefore in and of itself indifferent to existence. Every existentially contingent being, then, is *existentially incomplete* considered in itself, lacking by nature some specifiable characteristic, condition, or set of conditions required/necessary for its actual existence. To conceive of a thing solely by reference to its nature or concept as such is not to conceive of it as actually existent at T in world W, but only as possibly existent in some world or other at some time or other, which requires only the formal possibility of that thing and its extrinsic epistemic possibility, which together make it *presumptively* logically possible.[[4]](#footnote-4)

From this we can see what is right and what is wrong about Kant’s contention that there is no difference between the idea of an imaginary hundred thalers and an actually existing hundred thalers.[[5]](#footnote-5) On the one hand, since the hundred thalers under discussion is a materially contingent thing, its nature is indifferent to existence, considered just as such. Thus, the conceptual content of the two ideas is going to be qualitatively indistinguishable. Each will have, by nature, the same essential and dispositional predicates applicable to it as the other. However, if this is all there is to the matter, there will be nothing in these concepts that identifies one of them as merely imaginary and the other as actual or real. Kant, it appears, is simply stipulating (or “positing”) one of them as imaginary and the other as real without further explanation and thus failing to conceive of them as different in any way. The concept of a hundred thalers in each case is the same, as is its conceptual content considered as such, but as Kant himself points out there is all the difference in the world (and not just, as he avers, to my finances) between an imaginary and a real hundred thalers. Yet he says nothing about how those two are distinguished, even as objects of thought.

In order to conceive of them as different things, we need to conceive of one of those hundred thalers as merely possibly existent and the other as actually existent. That we can do only by imagining the latter as being given along with all of the conditions without which it would not otherwise exist as real or actual. Since a hundred thalers is a materially contingent thing, and thus by nature existentially insufficient to secure and maintain its own existence, it can be conceived of as actually existing only on the supposition that the necessary and sufficient conditions for its actually existence have themselves existed, occurred, or obtained prior to its coming into existence and either those same conditions or some subsequent set of other conditions have acted to keep it in existence until the present moment.[[6]](#footnote-6) As such, we cannot posit a hundred thalers as actual or existent apart from positing that the necessary and sufficient conditions for the existence of that hundred thalers has obtained. Since that thing cannot actually exist apart from some such set of conditions being met, whoever posits that hundred thalers as actually existent posits it in the context of the external conditions without which it could not actually exist. Indeed, even an imaginary hundred thalers, conceived of as an actual object of thought, has to be posited in relation to those conditions without which it would not exist as an idea, concept or mental image in someone’s mind and thus without positing that those conditions have been met. The difference between the two notions, then, will not be reflected in their conceptual contents, but rather in the relation of the putative object represented by those identical contents to reality.

Of course, in Kant’s example, both acts of positing are completely notional, and it is precisely this that leads Kant to suppose that there is no difference between the two cases, when there quite obviously is such a difference. Recognizing this, we also recognize that whenever we seriously posit anything as real or actual in fact, we are likewise committed to positing as real or actual whatever is necessary and sufficient for the existence of that thing in the actual world. Thus (*contra* Kant) *if something is given in experience or even posited as* ***actually existent****, then so too are the conditions without which it cannot actually exist.* These too must actually exist or obtain in order for the actual existence of what is given to do so, whether or not they are given along with that thing or even capable of being given in “experience.” Indeed, and more pointedly, we might do better to suppose that those conditions are given in experience, even if incapable of being represented there by sense-contents, *in* their observable effects as the necessary and sufficient conditions without which they would not exist, occur, or obtain *as* their cause or part of their cause. Indeed, without this supposition, Kant’s own transcendental philosophy would seem to be impossible.

In such case, we have an instance of what I have elsewhere called the EOG relation – a real relation between an existent and its ontological ground(s).[[7]](#footnote-7) This EOG relation is one of existential dependence in actuality, whether this concerns existence-change or persistence in being through time. This corresponds to Kant’s category of Ground and Consequent, which when schematized becomes the relation of causal succession in time, although Kant (under the influence of Hume) chooses to put the emphasis on temporal succession in accordance with a rule rather than the existential dependence of later on earlier on later events with regard to their occurrence when explicating this notion. In so doing, he fails to make a credible challenge to Hume, even if the argument of the Third Analogy succeeds, something that Kant scholars generally do not concede.

**The Traditional Proof for the PSR** It is traditional to claim that the PSR is a self-evident first principle apprehended *a priori* through rational intuition, and thus incapable of proof. The advantage of this is that it confers intrinsic certainty on that principle as a consequence of clear and distinct perception. The disadvantage is that one’s hands are tied when one encounters someone like Hume, who is prepared to call such a principle into question in order to evade its apparent implications, or to deny that it is a substantive principle applicable to real things. In response, defenders of the PSR from Leibniz to Garrigou-LaGrange have offered an indirect proof of the principle from the three laws of thought.[[8]](#footnote-8) Essentially, the PSR is shown to be equivalent to the PSR by relating it to the Principle of Contradiction. Following in this tradition, I wish to generalize the argument of the last section to the case of all materially contingent beings.

In this context, the PSR basically amounts to two basic claims:

No materially contingent being can be *conceived of* as actually existing without our also conceiving of it as *by nature* existentially dependent on ontologically prior actual conditions necessary and sufficient for its actually coming into and persisting in being.

No materially contingent being posited as real or actual can be so in abeyance of the prior actuality of the conditions necessary and sufficient for the coming into existence of that being and its persistence in being.

Hume argues against such principles in all their forms that they simply beg the question against the possibility that something might simply come into existence for no cause or reason whatsoever or continue to exist without any ontological support, something that he claims is not self-contradictory. In response, we can claim that there is a logical contradiction in supposing that something that, by its very nature, is materially possible only on the supposition that certain prior conditions exist, occur, or obtain is somehow actual despite the fact that those conditions have not existed, occurred, or obtained. Nothing can be actual unless it is materially possible. In the case of a materially contingent being, material possibility requires that, since the nature of such a being is indifferent to existence and therefore existentially insufficient to secure its existence without the prior actuality of independently-constituted external conditions, no such being is materially possible unless those conditions obtain. We cannot, therefore, conceive of that being as both actual and materially possible at the same time. To do so is to attempt to conceive, at one and the same time, of something as both incapable of actual existence in abeyance of certain conditions and yet as actually existent despite their failure to obtain. This is a contradiction, surely. Since material possibility is a necessary condition for actuality, as the foregoing analysis shows, in this case we are forced to concede that the actuality of such a being is inconceivable as well. Since this will hold for every materially contingent being of whatever description, the foregoing amounts to a proof that no materially contingent being can exist for no cause or reason whatever. This result will hold regardless of whether we are talking of such a being’s coming into existence or its persistence in being through time.

To put it another way, even if Hume is correct is supposing that the existence of something for no cause or reason whatsoever is formally possible – and I have argued that he has no good reason for supposing this – it does not follow from this that it is even logically possible that such a state-of-affairs could actually obtain. That is because formal possibility, the criterion for which is apparent imaginability without contradiction, is sufficient only to establish the intrinsic epistemic possibility of what we are perhaps only imaging rather than imagining. Logical possibility requires in addition that the object we are attempting to conceive is extrinsically epistemically possible as well, i.e. its epistemic possibility is not ruled out by other things that we know. In this case, the putative intrinsic epistemic possibility of something existing without cause or reason is trumped by our recognition that, in the case of materially contingent things, their actuality requires their material possibility and that apart from a cause or reason for their existence such beings are materially impossible. It is not the case, then, that materially contingent beings can exist for no cause or reason whatsoever, even if the formal possibility of that scenario cannot be ruled out. The apparent plausibility of Hume’s claim disappears when we realize that he is confusing formal with logical possibility, although he is not alone in being guilty of this.

**The PSR Applied** The proof offered here for the PSR is still lacking in one respect. We have still not shown that there is anything to which the analysis offered here applies. To remedy this defect, I will conclude this paper with yet another version of this argument, one that contains a substantive premise. This will show that the analysis of possibility and contingency given here is not merely formal, hypothetical or merely a theoretical exercise, but has actual scope with regard to a reality that transcends consciousness. The pretext for this claim will rest on what is, by now, a thesis I have often discussed before, but from which I continue to derive profitable

Thesis I: I exist.

This thesis asserts, as a matter of clear and distinct perception, the existence of myself *qua* self-conscious rational subject. Suppose I doubt my own existence. In that case, I find myself in a state of uncertainty with regard to a particular propositional content. However, if I doubt, then I think, i.e. am aware of (in this case) a propositional content about which I am in a state of uncertainty, which is the act of a self-conscious rational subject. Further still, if I think, then I exist, since thinking is an activity and thus a mode of existing, i.e. activity-as-such. Although I am at first aware of or apprehend only my state of doubt with regard to the propositional content that I exist, since doubting is a mode of thinking and thinking a mode of existing, I am able by degrees to grasp the more fundamental act in which each of these acts is grounded. Having completed this process, I directly and immediately apprehend this fact with extrinsic certainty of a sort that excludes the possibility that I could be mistaken or deceived about it by anyone or that it could be an illusion. Indeed, on any of these suppositions, I have to exist in order for it to be the case that I am mistaken, deceived, or subject to an illusion. At the same time and despite the certainty with which I grasp it, this thesis is both contingent and substantive, i.e. about reality rather than merely about the way that reality appears to me. Indeed, unless I exist as a self-conscious rational subject the very notion of appearance (understood as what appears to a self-conscious rational subject) is impossible.[[9]](#footnote-9)

From the time of Bishop Huet down to comparatively recent writers, it has been suggested that Descartes overstates his case and that the most that follows from the famous Cogito is that thought exists or that there is thinking, not that a self-conscious rational subject exists. However, since only a self-conscious rational subject could in fact make such claims in the first place, let alone propose to convince other self-conscious rational subjects that they are true on the basis of argument, such claims are idling. Even if true, we can apprehend them as such only if we exist precisely as self-conscious subjects capable of evaluating philosophical claims of the sort embodied in the Cogito. The very possibility of our seriously considering such claims requires that they be false, in which case there is nothing to be feared in them or gained by doing so. In the same way, the Cogito has often been treated as an argument, and a fallacious argument at that. I have argued above that the Cogito is not an argument but rather the direct and immediate apprehension of a fact about the world. However, even if it were best understood as an argument, this would be to no avail. Only a self-conscious, rational subject can entertain arguments and analyze them for their logical properties. Thus, even if the argument were fallacious, our being able to detect that fallacy presupposes the truth of its conclusion. As such, this sort of strategy fails in the same way as the last and there is no reason even to seriously consider any putative criticism to this effect. Indeed, unless I am a self-conscious rational subject, it is not even possible for me to do so.

Similar comments apply to Hume’s contention that there is no self, only a stream of consciousness composed of externally-related sense-contents automatically constructed in accordance with laws of association. Only a self-conscious rational subject can conceive of such a notion in the first place, let alone attempt to persuade not only himself but other self-conscious rational subjects as well that they don’t exist. If we can even so much as conceive of the possibility of Hume’s proposal, it must be false, since conceiving is only possible for a self-conscious rational subject of the sort that Hume wants to persuade us we are not. As such, either we cannot even so much as conceive of Hume’s proposal (since we do not exist as self-conscious rational subjects) or we are self-conscious rational subjects, in which case we can conceive of his proposal only on the basis of presuppositions that entail that it is false. In neither case, then, can we sensibly conclude that Hume’s proposal is actually correct – even if it is. It is therefore otiose to consider it further and we are perfectly within our rights to dismiss it without trial. Nor need we worry that natural science may somehow prove that there is no self, since the very possibility of science as a form of truth-directed theoretical inquiry also requires that those who engage in scientific research be self-conscious rational subjects. A proof that there is no self would, after all, be a proof that there are no scientists and no such thing as scientific truth as far as we are concerned. Each of us is, inescapably and ineluctably, a Cartesian *res cogitans*; either that, or rationality is itself impossible.

As I have already said, the Cogito, despite its extrinsic (i.e. demon-proof) certainty, is a contingent, substantive claim. It is not merely analytic, or merely a conceptual or formal truth. Neither is it a merely a claim about how things seem to me from the subjective, first-person point of view. Instead, it belongs to the class of substantive, factual claims about real things and is of the same order as “Giraffes exist” or “Water boils at 212 degrees Fahrenheit.” Although I know with extrinsic certainty that I exist whenever I choose to consider the matter, it nevertheless remains that the claim that I exist is a contingent rather than a necessary truth. It happens to be true, but it could very easily have been false.[[10]](#footnote-10) It thus functions as an empirical or synthetic claim about the world rather than a claim about how we use words or as a mere description of our subjective mental states, which in any event would also entail that I exist, precisely as a self-conscious rational subject, considered in their own right. The claim that I exist thus constitutes something that I know in the full and proper internalist sense: a factual belief about the world apprehended with certainty constituting a paradigm case of justified true belief. From here we can proceed to

Thesis Two: Something exists.

If I exist, then something exists, i.e. if I am real or actual, then at least one thing exists. This follows straightaway from the first thesis. A self-conscious subject is a thing, something real or actual, which consequently exists. So, I exist, then at least one thing exists. It is to be noted that neither the first nor the second thesis can be successfully translated into the first order predicate calculus.[[11]](#footnote-11)

Thesis Three: There is an actual world.

If I exist, then something exists, i.e. something real and actual. Since something actually exists, there is a way the world is, in part at least constituted by that fact. If there is a way the world actually is, then there is an actual world. At this point, it is at least epistemically possible that solipsism is the case, since for all I know my self-conscious rational subject is the only actual thing, while everything else is nothing more than one of my experiential contents. However, I believe that the analysis that I have given here will provide us with sufficient resources to get us beyond this impasse.

Thesis Four: Whatever is actual is possible.

Actuality entails possibility in every sense that I have distinguished in the previous paper. If I exist, then something exists. If something exists and I know that this is the case, then it is possible that something exists in every sense: formally, epistemically, logically, materially, physically, existentially and really in the actual world as well. By thesis one above, I know that I exist, and thus that my existence is possible in all of the above senses.

Thesis Five: I am a materially contingent being.

A materially contingent being is one that actually exists at T but which need not have existed at that time. Since I know that I exist at T, my existence at T is epistemically necessary for me. However, this is compatible with its being the case that I am materially contingent at T, a thesis for which it appears there is sufficient reason to count as justified true belief.

First of all, it is certainly formally possible that I not exist at T, insofar as it is apparently coherently imaginable that I might not have existed at T; this is sufficient for it to be intrinsically epistemically possible that I might not have existed at T. Further, there is nothing that I otherwise know that excludes that epistemic possibility at any moment that I exist. Hume, for example, states that there is no absurdity in the idea that any particular thing simply cease to exist at moment and this seems to be correct.[[12]](#footnote-12) However, whatever is both intrinsically and extrinsically epistemically possible is at least presumptively logically possible. If so, then I exist in some possible worlds and not others and the actual world just happens to be one of those worlds in which I exist. Since there is no absurdity in the notion that there might a possible world (however impoverished it may be) in which I do not exist, I have a further reason for supposing that my existence in the actual world is materially contingent. Further, the claim that I exist is clearly substantive and apparently contingent, i.e. true but not necessarily so about the actual world.

Further, the physical laws obtaining in the actual world do not *as such* exclude my non-existence at T since, as Hume avers, there is no absurdity in the notion that the entire physical universe, along with all of its laws, should cease to exist at T, or at some moment T-n prior to T, in which case neither would I exist at T. Even if my existence at T is physically necessary given those laws and the antecedent history of the universe prior to T, given that that history could have been otherwise, the physical possibility of my non-existence at T is not altogether ruled out in principle even if it is so in fact. We must also note that, had some possible world other than the actual world existed, one with different physical laws, then I may well not have existed at T.

There are thus no external reasons for supposing that I am not a materially contingent being. Secondly, as Descartes notes, I find within myself no cause or reason for my existence at T.[[13]](#footnote-13) That is to say, I find no principle in my nature that excludes the material possibility of my non-existence at the present moment. If, like Kant, I consider myself to be *merely* possible, or possibly existent in the abstract (like the hundred thalers in the earlier example), I will find that there is no difference between the conceptual content of the notion of myself *qua* actual self-conscious rational subject and such a subject merely imagined to exist but not posited as actual. Indeed, if this were not so, I could not even entertain the possibility that I might not exist. Thus, if my non-existence at T is even so much as conceivable in this way, it follows straightaway that I am a materially contingent being.

For all these reasons, then, I am justified in supposing that I am a materially contingent being.

Thesis Six: I am an existentially contingent being.

I am an existentially contingent being if that fact that I exist at T does not exclude the material possibility of my failing to exist at T. If I am a materially contingent being, then my existence at T does not exclude the possibility that I might not have existed at T, i.e. it is a contingent fact about the actual world that the necessary and sufficient conditions for my existence obtain at T, a fact that could have been otherwise, in which case I would not have existed at T. In that case, both my existence and my non-existence in W at T are materially possible, such that there are physically possible sets of conditions that, had they obtained, would have either excluded, prevented, or brought about the cessation of my existence at T or at some time T-n prior to T. In that case, my nature as such is indifferent to existence and existentially insufficient to account for that fact. From the fact that I exist, I know that no such conditions have obtained. Further, from that same fact, I know that whatever externally necessary and sufficient conditions for my existence there may be actually have obtained, since by the PSR, unless those conditions had obtained, I would not have existed. On the basis of the foregoing, we can affirm:

Thesis Seven: Conditions external to myself necessary to and sufficient for my existence at T have actually obtained both at some time T-n prior to T and at T as sustaining causes of my existence at T.

This will include a cause of my coming-into-being at some time T-n prior to T as well as any external conditions operating to sustain my existence at T. This follows from Thesis One above (I exist) and the PSR. Since such conditions actually exist, occur, or obtain, we can conclude:

Thesis Eight: Something exists external to myself upon which I depend for my existence at T. Q.E.D.

Solipsism is thus avoided. Astute readers will detect that we have all of the elements necessary for a version of the traditional cosmological argument for God’s existence, an argument I have given elsewhere.[[14]](#footnote-14) In the next paper in this series, I will present another version of the ontological argument based on the ideas developed here.

1. Austin Farrer, *Finite and Infinite*, London, Dacre Press, 1943, p. 268 – actually, all of pages 265-271 are relevant to this argument – reprinted by Seabury Press, New York, 1979. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. In other words, in any actual case of existence-change, the individual thing itself no longer exists, having been resolved into its elements. These elements, freed from that nature (which in relation to them was *substantial form* – an overall pattern into which they were integrated – do survive the existence change of that of which they were previously constituents. Thus, materially contingent beings are doubly composite – they consist of both separable essence and existence and substantial form and matter. For more on the distinctness and relation of these two principles, see Leo Sweeney, S. J., *A Metaphysics of Authentic Existentialism*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ, Prentice-Hall, 1965, 311-318. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, L. A. Selby-Bigge, ed., Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1888, 78-82.. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For a thing to be possibly existent in this way is different from what in this and my previous paper I described as existential possibility. The former considers existence solely from a formal point of view, whereas the latter notion belongs to material logic. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Kant, *First Critique* (Kemp-Smith translation), 505. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It does not follow, of course, that we must know what those conditions are prior to an investigation of the nature of the thing in question. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *The Proof of the External World*, London, James Clarke, 2008, 89-95. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. For Garrigou’s discussion of this proof, see *The Existence and Nature of God*, Dom Bede Rose, trans, St. Louis, Mo., 6th edition, 1934, Vol. I, 181-191. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. So much, then, for Kant’s claim that the I that accompanies all my representations is itself a representation of the noumenal self to inner sense. We need only ask “a representation of what to whom?” in order to break the spell of this idea. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Perhaps Spinoza, Leibniz, Hegel, and Brand Blanshard would have disputed this; however, this is not the place to take up their views. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Bede Rundle, *Why is the there Something rather than Nothing?*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2004, 108-117, retails some of the difficulties with the traditional quantificational analysis of statements involving existence. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Hume, Treatise, Selby-Bigge ed., 79. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Descartes, Third *Meditation*, CSM, 33-34. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Duncan (2008), op. cit., 126-142. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)